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Secretary Richardson Announces Proposal to Compensate Thousands of Sick Workers

Administration Addresses Cold War Legacy

Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson today announced a Clinton/Gore Administration initiative that reverses the decades-old government practice of opposing workers' claims that their illnesses resulted from the hazards associated with designing, testing and building nuclear weapons.

"For decades, government ignored mounting evidence that workers who were contributing to our nation's defense were themselves being put at risk," said Vice President Al Gore. "While we cannot undo their suffering, today this administration begins the process of healing by admitting the government's mistakes, designing a process for compensating these workers for their suffering and by becoming an advocate for Department of Energy workers throughout the nuclear weapons complex."

The announcement is the culmination of a series of actions that the Administration has taken over the past 10 months to compensate the men and women who developed illnesses from exposure to dangerous chemicals and radiation while working to build America's nuclear defense.

"We are moving forward to do the right thing by these workers," Secretary Richardson said. "The men and women who served our nation in the nuclear weapons industries of World War II and the Cold War labored under difficult and dangerous conditions with some of the most hazardous materials known to mankind. This is a fair and reasonable program. It will compensate workers and get them the help they have long deserved."

The Administration's proposal, if enacted into law by Congress, would compensate more than 3,000 workers with a broad range of work-related illnesses throughout the Energy Department's nuclear weapons complex. The legislation would give lump sum financial benefits or a package of benefits including lost wages, medical expenses and job retraining to workers with pulmonary diseases caused from breathing particles of beryllium, workers with cancers caused by workplace radiation exposure and specific groups of workers at the department's Paducah, Ky., Portsmouth, Ohio; and Oak Ridge, Tenn., sites.

The initiative expands on legislation introduced by Secretary Richardson in November 1999, in response to President Clinton's July 1999 request. Following its 8-month review, the National

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Economic Council (NEC) recommended to the President that the 1999 legislative proposal be significantly expanded. The 1999 legislation proposed benefits for workers with beryllium disease, a group of workers at the department's Paducah, Ky., plant and benefits for certain workers at the department's Oak Ridge, Tenn., site.

The administration's enhanced proposal would provide:

- *for workers with beryllium-related illnesses* – compensation comparable to benefits provided by the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA), including medical costs, lost wages and job retraining. All medical expenses would be paid in full by the compensation program, including prescriptions, treatments and travel costs. Workers diagnosed with a beryllium-related pulmonary condition before the legislation passes may choose a \$100,000 lump sum benefit or the compensation package. This applies to any past or present worker with chronic beryllium disease – including federal and contractor employees, as well as individuals who worked for companies that manufactured beryllium for the U.S. government;
- *for workers with radiation-related cancers* – the benefits will be the same as those for beryllium affected workers, including full, first dollar medical coverage, lost wages and job retraining. If adequate information about the amount of radiation workers were exposed to is not available, the Department of Energy will assume they were exposed to the highest amount of radiation associated with the tasks they performed. Workers diagnosed with a cancer caused by exposure to certain kinds of radiation before the legislation passes may choose a \$100,000 lump sum benefit or the compensation package;
- *for other groups of sick workers* – \$100,000 lump sum benefits are available to workers with specific types of cancer at the department's three former gaseous diffusion plants and, upon Secretarial approval, to a group of workers at the department's East Tennessee Technology Park in Oak Ridge who have illnesses an independent panel of physicians determines are caused by workplace exposures. These workers might also be eligible for benefits under the program for workers with radiation-related cancers; and
- *for workers with other occupational illnesses* – Secretary Richardson announced that he is establishing a workers' advocacy office to help workers with illnesses not specifically addressed in the legislative proposal obtain state workers' compensation benefits.

Total program costs, including administrative costs and worker benefits, are estimated to be about \$120 million annually over the first three years the program is fully operational, declining to about \$80 million per year after that as the backlog of claims is reduced.

Most of the workers who would benefit from this proposal have worked at the department's Hanford Reservation (Wash.), Oak Ridge Reservation (Tenn.), Savannah River Site (S.C.), Nevada Test Site, Rocky Flats Environmental Technology Site (Colo.), Pantex Plant (Tex.), Mound Plant (Ohio), Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (Calif.), Los Alamos National Laboratory (N.M.), Fernald Environmental Management Project (Ohio) and the gaseous diffusion plants in Paducah, Ky.; Portsmouth, Ohio; and Oak Ridge, Tenn. All workers with occupational illnesses across the

department's nuclear weapons complex will be assisted with state workers' compensation claims by the department's new advocacy office.

As part of the NEC-led review, one panel of government public and occupational health experts examined whether some workers at Energy Department nuclear weapons production facilities were at an increased risk for developing certain illnesses. Their conclusion supporting workers' claims was based on available scientific evidence, worker monitoring programs and other information.

A second panel of experts reviewed how Energy Department contractor employees with occupational illnesses fared in state workers' compensation systems and concluded more could be done to help workers in this arena.

The Department of Energy held several public town hall meetings to hear directly from workers about their illnesses. Approximately 3,000 current and retired workers and family members attended meetings held by Assistant Secretary of Energy for Environment, Safety and Health, Dr. David Michaels, near the department's major sites in: Paducah, Ky.; Piketon, Ohio; Oak Ridge, Tenn.; Rocky Flats, Colo.; Hanford, Wash.; Mercury, Nev; Los Alamos, N.M., and Burlington, Ia.

Further information about the administration's proposal, including benefit summaries, NEC materials and transcripts from public meetings, is available at www.eh.doe.gov/benefits.

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